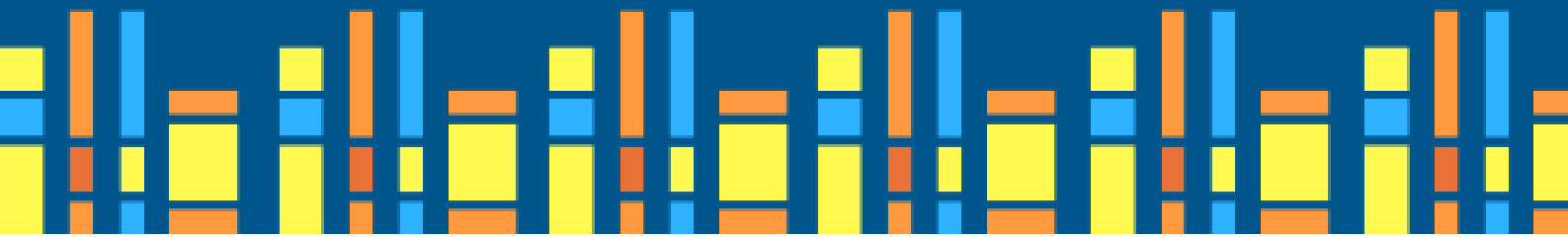


CITIZEN VOICES FOR DIGITAL RIGHTS

FINAL REPORT 2021



CITIZEN
VOICES
FOR
DIGITAL
RIGHTS



Report summarising the findings 2020 - 2021

Final Report

Citizen Voices for Digital Rights

Democratic Society

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Introduction

The Citizen Voices for Digital Rights programme (from now onwards also CVDR) was funded by the City Coalition for Digital Rights and engaged the cities of Amsterdam, Bordeaux, Milan and Tirana. It sought to address the role of digital technologies and develop a practical approach to improve the active participation of citizens in data collection, data governance and knowledge creation. It also sought to co-design pathways for citizens to advocate for their own, and their communities', digital rights.

All findings shared in this report draw on data analysis from the main workshops and experts' events. Discussion from each workshop were transcribed in the local language and later translated in English. The team at Democratic Society used these data and facilitators notes (where available) to produce an analysis and synthesis of the topics discussed. Through qualitative analysis of the text main themes emerged that are presented in this report. We hope these findings can help those municipalities that intend to approach their digital strategy in a participatory manner.

The programme aimed to engage, equip, and ultimately empower citizens with the skills, knowledge, and tools to self-advocate for their digital rights. It played a facilitatory role in bringing citizens together around the issue of digital rights and was, to a large extent, shaped by citizens and local digital rights activists themselves.

Digital rights are increasingly acknowledged as human rights and in the digital era this means not only protecting citizens' rights in the online space, for example the rights to online privacy and freedom of expression, but it includes also rights such as making sure everyone has access to the internet, or that children are not denied parts of their education - as the COVID-19 pandemic made visible - because they don't have the means to access online resources.

Throughout this project the team had a clear stance about valuing and eliciting the 'lived experience' of participants as a way to understand the implications of digitalisation in cities, what is of more or less concern for residents, how they felt the cities could act to advance digital rights, and how they could act themselves as residents to advocate for a better local democracy. This also involved working together with a range of stakeholders across Europe, such as digital rights experts, and political decision-makers, to discuss the best ways to ensure that everyone can have the knowledge, skills and pathways to advocate for their and their communities' digital rights.

Executive Summary

The digitalisation of our cities raises critical questions about the quality of life and the democracy that we want our cities to ensure. Developing resources for supporting municipal officials to design better technology for their cities in inclusive and democratic ways is something that needs more development and that is likely to be a growing trend in coming years. The 'Cities Coalition for Digital Rights' – as the sponsor of this project – has an important role to play to connect different cities so that they can learn from mistakes and successes already achieved by others in this field.

Citizen Voices for Digital Rights responded to the need to open up the debates on digitalisation processes and digital rights to the participation of the wider public so that these processes can be improved. This Executive Summary includes key recommendations and reflections that might be useful to other cities embarking in the same journey. These recommendations are based on our learning from working across four cities in Europe on how to improve the active roles of citizens to ensure a more just, democratic and inclusive data collection, data governance and digital rights.

The following four elements were identified as more prominent and informed the recommendations from the project.

Digital Literacy, Access and Empowerment:

The importance of digital literacy, access and empowerment was emphasised most strongly throughout the project. In a rapidly digitising world, participants stated that it is a fundamental right not only to have access to technology, digital tools, and the Internet, but also to have the knowledge and confidence to use them in a safe, secure, and beneficial way. This is a fundamental right that could be protected and promoted by governance organisations and institutions.

Acquiring a good level of digital literacy was considered a *pre-condition* for developing the knowledge and being able to recognise where and when citizens' digital rights are being infringed, and which systems and institutions they can trust and address to demand for justice.

The Role of the Municipalities in Advancing Digital Rights:

Municipalities have a key role to play in advancing digital rights especially in raising awareness among citizens about what these rights are and how to claim them. For this to happen cities need to build better capacity, more confidence and skills among the municipality administration itself.

Finding innovative and participatory governance solutions is critical to ensure that the task of advancing digital rights is not simply left to the individuals. Many residents in our programme highlighted the need for designing broader 'systems of accountability', which included municipal but also national and EU level systems of governance. As a recent study highlights: "*While major attention is currently given to the dominant model of corporate platforms collecting and economically exploiting massive amounts of personal data, other actors, such as small businesses, public bodies and civic society, take also part in data governance*"¹. Alternative models for data governance are numerous, (e.g including data commons, data cooperatives, data trusts but also indigenous data sovereignty practices among others²) and achieve better understanding of the existing ones at the municipal level is a key step needed in order to address the current power imbalances between corporate platforms on one hand and data subjects or public on the other.³

Transparency, Privacy and Accountability

Throughout the project, a clear need emerged for citizens to have more visibility on the use of their digital data, including by governments, and better mechanisms for holding data gathering entities to account. Privacy was discussed as an area where more awareness is needed. Many participants mentioned that people often do not pay much attention to securing their personal information for the sake of enjoying popular digital platforms, particularly due to a lack of understanding of the full implications of accepting the terms and conditions for digital services or a lack of alternative options. This lack of knowledge implies that accepting the existing terms and conditions becomes the default choice.

Helping people to take their privacy seriously without inhibiting their access to digital platforms and services for leisure or work was identified as a key challenge. This is an area where participants felt the cities hold a big responsibility to: on the one hand, inform residents through public awareness programmes about how to handle one's own data; and on the other hand, imagining ways to handle data at the city-level, for instance by establishing the public values that inform data collection and data use in the city. Participants were in fact keen on envisioning positive ways for how data collection could be used for the public good by making city information such as air quality, mobility and energy data a common property.

¹ Micheli, M., Ponti, M., Craglia, M. and Suma, A. B..(2020) Emerging models of data governance in the age of datafication. In: *Big Data & Society* 1–15 DOI: 10.1177/2053951720948087.

² van Geuns, J. and Brandusescu, A. (2020): *Shifting Power Through Data Governance*, Mozilla Insights

³ Micheli et al (2020) see footnote n. 1

Centering people's voices and the role of the *lived experience*:

Public participation and engagement were considered by participants to be at the centre of digitalisation processes to ensure strategies are developed in ways that advance digital rights. Participatory processes should be embedded in the design of cities' digitalisation strategies from the onset - rather than being an afterthought - and properly resourced. As recent studies have shown: "(...) *the 'smartness' of a (smart city) project is directly related to the level and nature of participation from people.*"⁴

As more cities are designing, developing and delivering their digitalisation strategies, two joint actions seem to become more critical. On one hand, the need to develop approaches for the digitalisation processes that embed participatory governance in order to improve the active role of citizens in data collection, data governance, and knowledge creation. On the other hand, our work also made clear the importance of growing the confidence of municipal civil servants and elected officials in order for them to foster discussions and negotiations about the different ways in which digital technologies can be used and introduced in cities in a way that benefit everyone and not just the few.

The four key points illustrated above will be critical issues to address for cities that want to develop their digital strategies in open and participatory ways. These digital strategies can in fact be understood from a democratic point of view as a key tool for advancing digital rights; and digital literacy should be framed as a condition for the ability of more people to critically partake in the digital transformation.

⁴ Kuster, C. and Scholten H. J. (2021): *Digitranscope Experiments: Digital Twins and Smart Cities, case studies of Amsterdam and Duisburg*, in eds by) Craglia M., Scholten H., Micheli M., Hradec J., Calzada I., Luitjens S., Ponti M., Boter J., Digitranscope: The governance of digitally-transformed society. Publications Office of the European Union, doi:10.2760/503546.

Project Overview

Citizen Voices for Digital Rights was a programme of work that took place from March 2020 to April 2021, coordinated by Democratic Society and in collaboration with Cities Coalition for Digital Rights, and the Municipalities of Amsterdam, Bordeaux, Milan and Tirana.

The project was initially supposed to consist of a series of in-person events, in each of the four contributing cities, as well as 'central' events in Brussels, which would bring together participants from each of the cities, to work face to face. As the project began at the start of March 2020, this quickly became impossible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to the flexibility and understanding of all participating cities, the programme of work was changed to meet all COVID-19 regulations, but it was frequently evaluated to make sure it remained true to the initial aims of the project.

Citizen Voices for Digital Rights consisted of three phases of work:

- The first phase was based on online workshops, one held in each of the four cities, bringing together local digital rights experts to provide local context and an insight into the priorities and 'hot topics' of the area, as well as any existing work on related topics.
- The second was a series of events, held with a group of residents from the cities and open to anyone to join. Milan, Amsterdam, Bordeaux and Tirana each approached the design of these series of workshops slightly differently. The common aim was to understand what people in the city held as priorities on the topic of digital rights, and what they thought the opportunities and challenges of working together would be. All the workshops included an element where participants were able to learn from local digital rights expert and policy makers, ensuring they had a shared base of knowledge with which to move into the discussion part of the event – as well as bringing their own experiences.
- The third phase brought together the participants from all the four cities at a virtual 'central' event. This event had topic-specific discussions that reflected the themes that had emerged from the city-level events. This was followed by a wider shared discussion on how these issues could be tackled by residents and cities, and also at the European level.

There were other activities included in the project, such as a livestreamed event that was part of Milan Digital Week, and additional work that each of the cities undertook alongside the project.

Democracy and Digital Rights

Policymakers and institutions are finding it difficult to set out the appropriate regulatory framework to guarantee citizens' rights online. Digital norms and standards continue to be set by global technology companies, many of whose business model lies in extracting value from individuals by transforming data of use into behavioural data and profiling⁵. Through getting users to click, share, and swipe, the providers of this digital infrastructure generate wealth by commodifying users' interactions and communications.

From a democratic point of view, a crucial question to ask is what **modes of governance** should be implemented for improving digital and data sovereignty in cities, that might be inspired by the principles of *new municipalism*⁶ and 'locally' grounded politics. Democratic questions are intimately linked with digitalisation, as if citizens have little control over their data and their rights, they are likely to experience a lack of agency in navigating the digital city. The 'Citizen Voices' project aimed to provide an opportunity to rethink and redefine what it means to be a citizen in a digital democracy.

Digital Sovereignty involves the capacity of society at large to make decisions and exercise control over the *development, implementation, and management* of digital technologies. Discussions on what it means to be a **sovereign citizen in the digital age** should include everyone, since they affect even those who do not own a mobile phone or have never been online⁷. As cities start their digitalisation processes, digital data and information are collected about every citizen regardless of their online access and use, as they simply use a public service or infrastructure, such as traveling with public transport.

Citizens are becoming increasingly aware and concerned about the ways in which digitalisation can affect democracy and democratic practice. As social media platforms become key players in the political realm⁸, issues of **misinformation and manipulated content** are more prominent. The now well-known phenomenon of the *echo-chambers*, risks in fact to create a digital environment where information is provided that reflects and reinforces one's own opinions, therefore amplifying misinformation and reinforcing existing beliefs that end up increasing the polarisation process in the public space. As the COVID-19 emergency has highlighted, fake news and conspiracy theories can potentially influence people's choices and their viewpoints. Concerns around the decline of civil rights in democratic spaces - like when governments and other institutions use digital tools as systems of control - have been raised, for example with facial recognition, widespread surveillance or the introduction of automated decision-making (AMD) systems for access to social services.

⁵ Zuboff, S. (2019): *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, London: Profile Books.

⁶ Russell, B. (2019): Beyond the Local Trap: New Municipalism and the Rise of the Fearless Cities. In: *Antipode*, 51(3), pp. 989–1010 doi: 10.1111/anti.12520

⁷ Floridi, L. (2020) The Fight for Digital Sovereignty: What It Is, and Why It Matters, Especially for the EU. In *Philosophy & Technology* 33: 369–378. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-020-00423-6>.

⁸ van Dijck, J. (2013) *The Culture of Connectivity. A Critical History of Social Media*, Oxford University Press.

Whilst the risks of digitalisation on democracy increase, the potential of using digital tools positively to allow for more participative forms of **democracy at scale** has currently reached a point never seen before. Digital tools can be used to amplify more traditional forms of participation and new tools have emerged that allow for expanding democracy in new ways. During the implementation of CVDR, digital tools emerged clearly as potentially useful to **improve democracy** at local level, for instance to connect representatives directly to citizens, to allow for public debates to be openly held and as participatory decision-making tools (e.g. of the like of Decidim in Spain). Expanding options for **civic tech** -that is technology used to directly improve or influence governance, politics, or socio-political issues- was also considered as relevant⁹. These technologies can encapsulate a wide range of tools, including but not limited to petition sites (to support advocacy), citizen portals (to improve government efficiency and service delivery), and civic engagement platforms (to enable deliberative and participatory engagement).

However, these processes and tools can only be considered 'democratic' or respectful of people's digital rights if they are accessible, and ethical and adhering to high standards, for example on user privacy. There must also be alternative 'offline' methods to engage with any process, so that they are still reachable for those without access to an internet connection or technology, or for those who choose not to participate online.

⁹ Saldivar, J., Parra, C., Alcaraz, M., Arteta, R., Cernuzzi, L. (2018): Civic Technology for Social Innovation: A Systematic Literature Review in *Computer Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW)*, DOI: 10.1007/s10606-018-9311-7

The role of Civic Participation

"It can be tempting to think that if an issue isn't raised through existing channels, then no one cares about it. However, it may also be that the public do not know about a particular issue which, if offered the required information and avenues for involvement, they would otherwise want to have a say on. Research has shown that when it comes to questions of data and technology, for example, a lack of knowledge is not due to apathy or ignorance, but is often an outcome of the obscurity of the processes surrounding algorithmic decision-making and a sense of disempowerment that anything can be done about their uses." (Data Justice Lab)¹⁰

Citizen Voices for Digital Rights had a clear stance about valuing and eliciting the **'lived experience'** of participants to better understand the implications of digitalisation in cities, the concerns and priorities of residents, and their views on how cities could advance digital rights and how they themselves could act as residents to advocate for a better local democracy. When using traditional methods of governance, municipal officials have no access to the hopes and fears that residents have for their digital rights and those of their communities, or how digital rights materialise in the everyday of different groups and individuals. For this reason, the CVDR project positioned citizens' lived experience as a valuable alternative knowledge source that could provide new and interesting routes to fully understand the nuances and the scale of the challenges and opportunities ahead when cities are designing and deploying digital strategies and data governance structures.

This approach is very central in theories and practice of democratic participation and citizens engagement, particularly on technical subjects such as digital rights. Whilst the citizens who participate may not be experts on human rights, international law, AI or data harvesting, they are best placed to understand their needs as citizens and communities existing in an increasingly digital world. By discussing complex policy areas in 'tangible' ways - communicating how these issues intersect with daily life - participants can communicate their experiences, perspectives and ideas. This can be combined with an 'educational' element, for example having participants hear from a subject-area expert, or asking them to consume informative briefing materials, prior to any discussion, so that they have a solid base of introductory knowledge.

Our approach to residents' engagement was not just *functional* as a method to harvest the lived experience of digitalisation processes, but it was very much rooted in the democratic ideal that the public has the **right to be involved** in decisions that will shape their lives. Whilst participatory processes can take longer and are not easy to implement, they have a central role to play to advance more sustainable and fairer policy-making.

¹⁰ Data Justice Lab, (2021): *Advancing civic participation in algorithmic decision-making: A guidebook for the public sector.*

Participatory and deliberative processes bring together a diverse group of people to learn, share and hear different perspectives, discuss and consider options, and ultimately reach informed and considered decisions about priorities for a specific policy field. Specific expertise and design are needed to ensure that these processes are successful in listening to the broadest possible range of voices, integrating different perspectives, and taking into account the systemic consequences of a decision on different segments of the population.

A key component of the CVDR project was to ensure a recruitment process that was inclusive of the voices of those who are frequently underrepresented and that may feel disenfranchised. Since the delivery of the activities had to be moved online due to the COVID-19 regulations, questions of digital poverty and issues of access to digital tools emerged as an additional challenge. Democratic Society developed **guidelines for recruitment** based on general recommendations and best practice in the field of citizens engagement, such as making sure that the demographics of the participants reflected the demographics of the city (taken from latest census data or similar sources). Specific guidelines included offering participants access to an internet connection or tech equipment to join the online workshop, if they did not have this already; as well as encouraging cities to advertise the event both in online and offline spaces.

Main Activities

Expert workshops

The expert workshops were the first phase of Citizen Voices for Digital Rights. Initially added to the programme to make a good use of the time before in-person events could –we hoped– resume in Autumn 2020, they proved to be invaluable in shaping the rest of the programme of work, and in helping us create networks with others working in the same cities.

We gathered between five and fifteen people, who were living or working in each city, and who were knowledgeable about some aspect of digital rights, particularly in the local context. This gave us a broad range of participants, including people working in the education system locally, UNDP staff and User Experience (UX) designers. These workshops were held in English and were facilitated by staff from Democratic Society.

The expert workshops in the four cities followed the same design, to make it easier to compare results from each of the cities. The conversation during the workshop was focused on three key areas:

- Exploring current/existing work in citizen engagement and digital rights.
 - What work are you doing?
 - What other projects and networks do you know of?
 - Are there events or spaces we could connect to?
- Exploring ‘hot topics’ and areas of increased interest for digital rights
 - What are the issues related to digital rights that are relevant in your city?
 - What are people already talking about - in the media/social media/public spaces?
- What do you think the future might involve if citizens had more influence in digital rights decision-making?
 - What would you like ‘digital rights’ to look like in your city? By 2025, what would be different?
 - How can we/you/people shape that? How can you see your organisation helping?
 - What are existing processes that could support this? What might public advocacy look like in this space?

As these conversations took place during May and June 2020, many of these talking points were influenced by issues brought to the fore by COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns. From our analysis of the transcripts, we identified six main themes in the digital rights debate, as they emerged from the experts’ workshop:

- ***Education – intended as both digital in education and education about digital***

Education was mentioned both in relation to the use of digital in education, particularly as part of remote schooling during the pandemic, but also more generally. There were several fears raised regarding the security and ethics of the software being used, as well as around tech poverty and access to necessary equipment for all students.

Participants also discussed education on the use of digital and digital rights, not only for those of school age but for everyone. There was mention of low levels of digital literacy where people were struggling not only to use tech at the most basic level, but struggling to use it effectively, efficiently and safely.

- ***The digital divide***

Discussions about Education were often linked to the issue of the digital divide, with COVID-19 exposing not only who had access to technology but also the gap between the digital and 'real' world – and who had the privilege of working and meeting virtually. These issues were stressed as being widespread and urgent. It was mentioned how these issues would be further embedded by the 'fourth industrial revolution' – and how the divide should be understood as existing not only along socioeconomic lines, but also along geographical lines (broadband speed) or cultural lines, amongst others.

- ***Misinformation***

There was much discussion around misinformation and fake news, and how these posed very real threats. Not only did participants see this having an impact on democracy, but the fear was that a lack of trust in facts, experts and media had potential implications for urgent issues, such as climate change – if people were unable to put their trust in basic information in order to act.

- ***Algorithms and AI in the Public Space***

There was much concern in the expert group around issues of algorithms and AI used in public services, and their impact on digital rights, particularly as this applies at city level, for example in building smart cities. Interestingly this topic was not directly raised as a priority for citizens in the four cities involved (possibly also due to a lack of information or understanding of how AI and algorithms are introduced and used in public services and the public space).

The understanding that algorithms and AI are increasingly used both in the physical and digital space to collect data, perform continuous analysis and to make decisions was something that experts in the workshops felt should be given more visibility in the public debates. There was also a conversation around how to ensure people understood the importance of their privacy online, rather than taking an '*I have nothing to hide*' attitude.

- **How to make digital rights a priority of the public sector**

Linked to the concerns around misinformation, worries about the relationship between digital rights and public sector were also identified. Participants stated that “*fake news goes hand in hand with loss of trust in institutions*”. For public bodies there is a dilemma around moving fast and digitalising to benefit people, whilst also protecting them. In fact, COVID-19 exposed the lack of strategy for a lot of institutions. There were concerns raised about how the public sector is using new technologies, and how transparent it is around this – for example the use of biometric data collection for police surveillance or use of opaque algorithms in designing smart cities.

- **How to make digital rights a priority of the private sector**

It was acknowledged that people in general may be more suspicious of public sector tech or digital use, and more willing to accept terms and conditions of private tech companies. There was also a broader discussion of the role and responsibility of private organisations, and how this could be addressed through more public oversight on corporations or better regulation and governance structures. Other issues discussed regarding the private sector included the danger of monopolies, and how to deal with the ‘data for profit’ model. On a more positive note, experts from all cities emphasised the need to encourage innovation, particularly from more diverse creators and to champion those using more ethical methods, for example building open-source options.

City events

The aim of the city-level events was to meet with groups of residents from each city who had a mixed level of understanding of digital rights, to find out what their hopes and fears for their digital rights and those of their communities were, and to ask how they thought they could work with their city on digital rights in the future.

This phase saw each city organising a series of *Open Citizens’ Events*. Milan, Amsterdam, Bordeaux and Tirana each approached the design of these workshops slightly differently and cities were responsible for the participants’ recruitment. In order to ensure that this was done in an inclusive way and by engaging as much as possible a representative sample, Democratic Society provided recruitment guidelines to inform the process.

All four events – each comprising several workshops - were designed slightly differently, to meet the needs of each of the cities. All the events were held in the local language to make them more accessible. There were options for participants to use tech devices provided by the city to join the events, and events were advertised offline as well as online.

Amsterdam

The Municipality of Amsterdam held their event online, with a mix of residents of the city.

Four key themes emerged from the discussion:

- that the city should **lead by example** when it comes to digital rights;
- that privacy and use of data must be **clear and transparent**;
- that digital rights must be **convenient**;
- and that **education** is key in achieving *better digital rights for everyone*.

It was clear that participants felt that municipality and other public institutions should make sure they were following best practice on digital rights and “*put their own house in order*” as a priority in their work on digital rights, including using open-source for all their digital tools and using ‘digital rights-proof applications’ amongst other requirements.

There were also calls for public sector workers in the city, including city representatives, to develop more and better knowledge of technology and digital rights, so that they could make informed decisions and push forward a better digital agenda. As part of this, participants wanted governance to be more transparent, with more horizontal relationships between the city and residents, versus companies and authorities. They also wanted the legal and technical aspects of their digital rights to be made clearer for people and offer options for action.

This was connected to the need to educate people of all ages about digitalisation and technology, and specifically their digital rights. The distinction was made between **digital skills** (knowing how to operate a computer) and **data skills** (being aware of what data traces you are leaving behind), stating that both aspects were important and should be linked.

It was felt that everyone in the city should be **data literate** – understanding the use of data and why this is important. Participants felt that this education would have to be accompanied by guidance on the convenience of different choices to make sure that ‘better’ choices were made. **Convenience** for citizens included increased transparency through making options clear, using simple and non-technical language and providing distinguishable choices for users. It was clear that people found the current use of complicated *cookies*, pop-ups, and terms and conditions to raise complex questions and practical solutions were brought forward, like making sure that privacy choices should not have to be reset for every app or website.

Privacy was seen as an especially important topic, with demands for ‘**privacy by design**’ as a starting point, and data belonging to the individual stored locally. Citizens also asked for clear and accessible information on who has access and sources data on users, how and where this is shared, and what that data is used for. People wanted greater control over permission settings.

Bordeaux

The City of Bordeaux held five separate events, in person, each led by a 'local' expert that had been present at the online workshop with the city, and they were open to a selected group of residents of the city who were invited to participate. These events were on the themes of *digital literacy, digital education, digital inclusion, trustworthiness of data and the creative uses of new technologies*.

The conversation on digital literacy focused on the right to information, such as the actual energy expenditure of a digital service or the prerequisites for the use of a digital site. This also included the prioritisation of helping users to make choices with awareness of the real consequences and results. It called for training on '**digital sobriety**'. This included the need to develop better links between digital rights and the ability to make '**green**' choices – through, for example, rights to services with low carbon footprints and standards and labels for this.

The event that covered digital education looked at the importance of ***the rights of children to a critical digital education***, and the need for children to have access to support, as well as to be able to test and explore digital spaces and uses. The importance of a supervised and secure environment, with knowledgeable oversight, for children to learn about digital and technology was stressed. This includes appropriate training for parents, guardians, community leaders and educators. Participants also acknowledged that people need to be able to take advantage of the immense wealth of digital tools. Access to culture, quality of the content, facilitated exchanges, cultural openness were all considered positive aspects of digitalisation that could be enabled by a good use of digital tools.

The conversation on digital inclusion encouraged the development of ***common accessibility standards*** at European level and the right of people to know and understand the real uses and obstacles related to the use of digital technology in their respective populations. There were calls for user experience to be improved so as not to exclude or create barriers to entry, enabling digital identity to take many forms.

Interesting findings also emerged from the event on ***trustworthiness of data***, where citizens discussed the need for more participation in data governance processes, together with the importance of trustworthy data being collected and presented in usable and context-relevant ways so that they could support more transparency in citizens decisions.

Finally, when discussing about the ***creative use of technologies***, interesting conversations were held on the importance of the "making" culture that - through prototyping and making with technologies – can allow us to shift our relationship with the manufacturing process. Building on the international movement of the FabLabs, and its French examples (see <https://myhumankit.org/le-humanlab/>), during the workshop issues of technologies production were discussed at length.

Milan

The event held in by the Municipality of Milan was split into two parts, the first was a public livestream with speakers, including elected representatives of the city, local academics and entrepreneurs, giving their perspective on the future of digital rights in Milan. The second part was a private event with high-school students from the city (mostly seniors, 17 and 18 years old), who had been active in local politics and at school.

For this second part, different topics were discussed. The workshops aimed at exploring young people opinions on digital rights and how these can take shape in practice, affecting the lives of people living in Milan. Hopes and fears of this younger generation in relation to digitalisation were also explored.

Participants highlighted digital access, education and empowerment as the top priorities in considering digital rights. There was also discussion about how to strike the right balance between **freedom of expression and protecting users**.

Participants said that people should be able to express themselves and feel empowered to do so efficiently online. However, there was a view that currently people can **cause harm** to others through these digital outlets, particularly marginalised communities, including - as it was mentioned - the LGBTQ+, with no repercussions. This was something that participants felt should be addressed.

The right to privacy and helping people to understand the importance of this as well as how to protect their privacy was emphasised.

The second part of these group discussions focused on challenges and opportunities in the use of digital technology, with respect to the **present and future of democracy**. Participants discussed how great a risk to democracy fake news and disinformation is. This included exploring how to raise awareness to educate people on avoiding fake news and seeking verified content instead, and how to make sure people self-moderate and understand the harm in generating and spreading misinformation. The risk of polarisation and populism presented by misinformation and confirmation bias was also seen as a significant threat to democracy.

Participants finally explored the opportunities and challenges in the **collaboration between citizens and the City** of Milan and how the city could support digital inclusion more positively. Participants were favourable about the ways in which digital tools can promote inclusion and diversity in political conversations. For instance, they reflected on how it is easier now than ever for activists and advocates to share their ideas, and people are empowered to get involved more easily.

Tirana

The event with residents of Tirana was held online, with a diverse group of citizens, some using tech provided by the city through their '**BiblioTech**' programme¹¹.

The event was divided into two sections – the first focused on themes and topics within digital rights. This began with a '**learning**' session, where participants heard from three Albanian digital rights experts. During this first 'learning' session, three local experts gave **context to the issue of digital rights** and spoke of its specific relevance to the residents of Tirana. The topics covered were the following: digital rights, digital literacy and democracy, digital privacy and security, and digital education and accessibility.

This learning part was then followed by a conversation between participants, sharing their own experiences of digital rights. The main themes of the discussion included privacy and security issues. Many participants asked "How secure are we really?" and discussed the need to know more about the **ownership and protection of data**, including the use of personal data by various stakeholders for profit, and whether protection regarding this should be included in Albanian legislation.

The second half of the event saw participants hearing from the Innovation Team at the Municipality of Tirana, about ongoing engagement and participation on digital rights in Tirana, as well as looking at best practice globally. This continued with a discussion between participants on ideas and **opportunities for residents and the Municipality of Tirana to work together on digital rights** and what motivates people to take part in conversation on this topic.

Three key conclusions were drawn from this session. Firstly, that workshops about digital rights like the ones held through this project are crucial and should be more frequently organised in Tirana, and throughout Albania (to avoid focusing only on the Capital City and allow more **diverse groups to be involved**). Secondly, information on digital rights should be a subject in the pre-university education system and a specific curriculum should be designed for this. Finally, there should be **awareness raising** campaigns in Albania dedicated to the impact that digital rights have and how it is impacting everyday life of all citizens, as there was the feeling that the general public was still not sufficiently aware of the relevance of these issues.

¹¹ In 2020 UNICEF and the Municipality of Tirana have launched the programme "BiblioTech", which uses hubs as physical spaces for the digital learning and development of children, young people and adults, to enhance crucial 21st century skills, while learning about online safety and security

Milan Digital Week

The Citizen Voices for Digital Rights project was showcased at [Milano Digital Week](#) on 19 March 2021. First, we heard from four resident representatives of Tirana, Milan, Bordeaux and Amsterdam on their communities' challenges and priorities related to digital rights. They were followed by three EU digital rights experts.

There were common themes mentioned by the residents' representatives, including concerns about people's lack of understanding about how they use data and how their data is used, and the challenges that cities face in getting citizens to see these issue.

"People nowadays think of privacy as a question of private lives, not thinking that in digital world privacy is a question of personal information that can be found and used." – Megia Petriti, Tirana, Albania.

These speakers also stressed the importance of the link between climate change and digital rights, wanting a better understanding of the weight of their carbon footprints from their digital lives and suggesting options such as mandating carbon footprint in public selection criteria for digital providers. They said finding ways to increase access to and sustainability of digital services should be a priority, allowing digital to become part of the solution to climate change, not part of the problem.

One of the main fears voiced, was that people don't know how to navigate information on the internet. With fake news and hate speech threatening democracy by spreading misinformation and discrimination, further dividing people and directing their opinions and choices, there is a critical need for accountability and transparency in digital services for public trust. Digital platforms can and should be used as ways to connect cities and citizens for meaningful public debate.

"I am 22 years old. I grew up in a generation of computers and social media. There is no manual on how to cope with all this information on the internet." – Matthieu de Puysseleire, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

In the second part of the session, three EU level digital rights expert – Sarah Chander ([European Digital Rights – EDRI](#)); Antoine Vergne ([Missions Publiques](#)) and Harry Panagopulos (European Commission [DG JUST](#)), spoke about their perspectives on challenges and opportunities for Europe's digital future.

These speakers covered the need for people to be better engaged in deliberative processes to close the gap between digital and governance systems and the impacts of decisions on people's lives. Providing information on issues

or challenges and providing mechanisms for active engagement on these is seen as one way to address this gap. The Global Citizens Dialogue being run by Missions Publiques in 80 countries, features 1,500 group discussions where citizens formulate views together on scenarios such as 'Data as human rights and personal reflection' and 'Data as resource'.

"Accountability goes through inclusion of all actors in governance. The key is to have all actors at the table. Now there is an unbalance in that governance. There should be a system where all actors have a voice. Accountability through inclusion. Not through differentiated power." – Antoine Vergne, Missions Publiques.

Speakers called for better ways to increase citizens' *resilience* in the digital environment so they can make better, safer use of it, through measures stated in the [European Democracy Action Plan](#) such as ways to counter disinformation, promote more democratic participation, and strengthen media freedom. The European Commission's DG JUST is promoting transparency on political content in the media freedom and pluralism context by looking at the ways European political parties are financed and proposing measures to enhance the safety of journalists.

The speakers talked about the drawbacks of artificial intelligence and automated technologies for decision making, and the need to address growing power disparities between people who deploy and those who interact with or are subject to these technologies. EDRi are examining the impact of these technologies on democracy in everyday contexts, such as law enforcement abuse of biometric data to target communities, and recently launched '[Reclaim Your Face](#)', a campaign contesting technology infringing rights in public space.

"We don't think the burden should be on the individual. LGBTIQ, migrants, people with disabilities... the system is not working now. These people should not need to have access to lawyers or have read the entire GPDR so as not to be discriminated against, or to be able to access public services." – Sarah Chander, EDRi.

All speakers shared this view that the burden should not be on individuals to have knowledge of where their digital rights are being infringed, and which systems and institutions they can trust. There is a need for accountability more broadly, including legislation at national levels. The Digital Services Act and Digital Markets Act are examples of newer legislation providing more general protections in this area.

There were, however, positive aspects related to digitalisation mentioned by the speakers, including the possibilities for data to unlock positive futures by transforming the trust in data and seeing it as a human right.

You can watch the Citizen Voices for Digital Rights session at Milan Digital Week 2021, in full, [here](#).

Central event

The 'central' event of the Citizen Voices for Digital Rights project was designed to bring participants from all four of the contributing cities together, so they could meet each other, and understand the wider scope of the project. This also provided an opportunity to run a process side by side with participants from all cities to gain directly comparable qualitative data, and allow us to see where the commonalities, across Europe are on digital rights, as well as what the local differences are.

The content of this event was designed to allow participants to learn about and discuss:

- How their digital rights are influenced at the EU level;
- How they can currently engage with decision-making at the EU level;
- What the current priorities and next steps for digital rights are at the EU level;
- The work that relevant civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other organisations are doing in this capacity.

We also hoped that bringing together people from different European cities to discuss digital rights in a thoughtful and collaborative way, could help us to indicate the value of engaging diverse groups of people on this subject, particularly decision-makers and other actors at the EU level.

The event was held online, with all participants joining remotely, and we used 'breakout rooms' to allow for smaller group sizes, giving all participants more time to speak. All discussions were facilitated by staff from Democratic Society.

The main part of the central event encouraged participants to choose one of four breakout rooms, each with a different subject, to join and discuss that topic. The topics were:

access to digital; digital education and skills; privacy vs. transparency and the use of data; and democracy and disinformation

These topics were chosen in advance because they had all been strong themes during each of the city workshops that this overall event offered the opportunity to expand on with a pan-European angle. Participants were given 'briefing packs' in advance for the event with information about each of the topics, including why it had been chosen, so they were prepared to join the discussion on the day. They were also encouraged to exercise the 'rule of two feet' and move between breakout rooms if they wanted to take part in more than one conversation.

Main Findings

“Leaders who want to help their citizens by modernizing their cities while strengthening democracy have had few resources outlining a better approach to government technology.” (Bhatt, Doten, and Gilburne, 2021)¹².

The impact of digitalisation becomes very tangible at local level and raises new challenges for civil servants and elected officials. Drawing on the final events and the cities’ workshops this section provides a detailed overview of the main findings as they emerged from the Citizens Voices for Digital Rights programme of work.

CVDR provided practical steps and approaches to open-up a citizens-centred development of digitalisation strategies. This approach interestingly revealed how much citizens’ concerns are aligned with the key issues that policy makers - as well as scholars from Academia - are debating in this field, like the danger of monopolies, the ‘data for profit’ model, the lack and need of alternative digital choices, the importance of data for the public good and open-source options.

Access to digital

Access to digital emerged as a key topic as this was discussed throughout city-level events. Participants were particularly concerned about the level of technology accessibility with reference to certain groups of society like senior citizens, young people or those who might be most marginalised, and how this impacts their everyday lives. It was often raised that access to tools and the internet should be universally provided. Participants pointed out that when enhancing accessibility, local authorities should focus on people’s capacity-building, rather than solely providing tools.

As a result of the digitalisation process existing social inequalities can be exacerbated, whilst completely new forms of inequality also start emerging. **Digital inequalities**, despite what their name suggests, are social inequalities that because of the widespread use of the digital tools expand potentially to every aspect of our lives¹³. For one to speak about digital inequalities, there needs to be both **difference** and **disadvantage**¹⁴. In fact, inequalities refer not only to imbalances in how users may access or use digital technologies, but they also reflect how - as a result of these differences - certain users are disadvantaged while others might instead take advantages from digital technologies. As access to public services online or the capacity to use online resources for public and private issues increase, the question of inequalities of access becomes crucial.

¹² Bhatt, Priyal; Doten, Chris and Gilburne, Jillian (2021): *Municipal Digital Transformation Guidebook. A guide for municipal leaders with the drive to embark on digital transformation programs*, The National Democratic Institute.

¹³ van Dijk, J. (2020): *The Digital Divide*, Polity

¹⁴ Wyatt, S., Henwood, F., Miiller, N. and Senker, P. (2000): *Technology and In/Equality: Questioning the Information Society*, London and New York: Psychology Press.

Initially focused on the so-called **digital divide**, questions of digital inequalities in the relevant literature were initially framed as questions of 'having' and 'having not', as in having or not a computer, having or not an internet connection, and so on. These forms of digital divide were still very present in the view of citizens and with varied degrees from city to city, and when comparing cities to more rural areas.

Since that time, the literature has moved towards a more sophisticated understanding of digital inequalities, which includes questions of access, engagement and outcomes as well. These issues also emerged clearly from the discussions in the workshops.

In talking to citizens in our project we heard for instance about issues of **usage gaps**¹⁵, which are gaps that can arise from a lack in possession, lack in the technology design or differences in digital skills. But we also found inequalities in accessibility of content, as what content different people might or might not encounter varies due to various reasons, including access being geographically determined, as issues of geofencing or geo-blocking show.

To conclude, on **question of access** we found that it was more appropriate to talk about *access rainbows*¹⁶ or *shades of inequalities* to fully describe the different issues that digital inequality can entail and that could emerge from the digitalisation process in cities. Municipalities engaging in the development of their digital strategies should be aware of this complexity regarding questions of digital inequalities.

Digital Education and Skills

During all of the city-level events, residents highlighted the important role of digital literacy in everyday life. This entails allowing users to take advantage of the opportunities of digital - be it using bank services or surfing the internet - whilst understanding how to stay secure and empower themselves. It was noticed that there is an insufficient level of knowledge and awareness among the European population on how to best use digital spaces.

Digital literacy - which is the term used to describe the skills needed to become able to use digital tools proficiently - includes more than simply the access to technologies and the skills to use that effectively but should include critical skills as key elements as well. Experts in the field have recently started talking about the existence of a *digital capital*¹⁷, which together with the social, economic, personal, political and cultural resources that people can mobilise, can determine diversity in levels of online access that produce tangible outcomes online that will also impact the social sphere. Those with more resources (e.g., higher education, higher level of political participation, etc) are therefore likely

¹⁵ van Dijk, J. and Hacker, K. (2003) The Digital Divide as a Complex and Dynamic Phenomenon. In: *The Information Society* 19(4), pp 315-326

¹⁶ Selwin, N. (2004): Reconsidering political and popular understandings of the digital divide. In: *New Media & Society* 6(3).

¹⁷ Ragnedda, M. (2018) Conceptualizing Digital Capital. In: *Telematics and Informatics* 35 (8): 2366–2375. doi:10.1016/j.tele.2018.10.006

to develop better digital skills and achieve the outcomes they set for themselves, by using digital resources and services.

Participants were asked to consider what it means to be **'empowered'** and 'have their rights upheld' in digital spaces. We also asked what kind of capabilities and capacities are needed, beyond simply providing tools, and who can and should provide this support. Many referred to the importance of defining the digital needs in a participatory way, to allow different perspectives and voices to be considered. Digital skills and their development were considered to be a crucial skill-set to be included in all educational paths for children, together with **critical thinking and problem solving** skills related to the digital field. There were also calls to adopt *'train the trainers'* models, particularly with teachers, before they were to share knowledge with others.

In imagining practical ways in which better digital education could be provided, citizens referred to the possibilities of community hubs like public libraries - like in the BiblioTech example in Tirana - to reach different age groups and a diverse audience. In order to further opportunities for **community-led digital education**, participants also talked about younger people or students tutoring those with lower digital skills. Digital skills emerged increasingly as key **civic skills** that are necessary to be able to access public services in the civic space. Many participants talked about the need for the wider public to be better informed of the risks in the use of technology in all respects, and that adults should be trained to adapt to a digital landscape that is constantly changing.

"This has become an emergency. In France, the government has set the objective of 100% digital government services by 2022. [These skills] have become indispensable." A participant

Education would need to start by building **digital awareness** and could then move towards tackling digital literacy. It would need to be obvious why this literacy matters and where to access this information because otherwise people will not know they need to seek it out. On the **participation ladder**¹⁸, in fact, informing is the first step towards more participation.

When discussing the balance between different responsibilities in developing digital capabilities, skills and knowledge, between citizens and governance institutions (at different levels), participants were clear about the fact that this needed to be a shared concern, with citizens and governments taking responsibility in different ways. Governments should lead the way on providing and showing the importance of digital education, on one side, since public institutions have a responsibility not to leave anyone behind, and to make sure that digitalisation happens in an inclusive way. Citizens, on their side, need to be responsive to governmental initiatives in this field, seek out information

¹⁸ Arnstein, S.J. (1969) A Ladder of Citizen Participation, in *Journal of the American Planning Association*, , 35:4, pp. 216-224. In this paper Sherry Arnstein famously introduced the ladder of citizen participation, which describes a stepped approach that showed participation ranging from high to low

around what is available and train themselves – for instance through learning by doing – regarding the ethics of information and use of data online.

Participants also considered how we might explore models where citizens lead, rather than being prescribed solution, and what the role of government institutions would look like in this scenario. Governments – especially at national and EU level - should still play a key role in protecting people, particularly against private interests.

Privacy vs. Transparency and understanding the Use of Data

During the programme it was frequently remarked that people often do not care about securing their personal information as they prioritise enjoying popular digital platforms, particularly due to either a lack of understanding or a lack of alternative options. Participants were asked to consider how to ensure more awareness on the importance of protecting everybody's privacy and whether this was a communication challenge or an education challenge. They shared examples of how these challenges materialize as many people still believe that they "**don't have anything to hide**" and therefore that privacy questions do not apply to them directly. Participants felt that better education could be a starting point as they thought that many people still do not know what personal data actually means, how it is collected and how it is used, and that this needed to be made clear consistently.

They felt that often there was a **trade-off on data** to be made because it was necessary to access a service, that did not provide a more 'ethical' option. Examples included things like applying for a job and accessing digital maps. This was also true of the relationship with governance institutions and public bodies – as many times they are also perceived as not hold accountable. Options to ensure more and better privacy seriously, without inhibiting people's access to service and public security were discussed, including the central role of public services to lead by example. In the case of COVID-19, for instance, citizens felt that temporary measures taken in time of crises, ended up in some cases to become permanent. In the longer term, this was considered to be highly dangerous as people might become less likely to question a public institution, and this idea might even translate to the point that more people might feel "*It is okay*" when private organisations do the same thing.

Questions of transparency on how personal data is used and processed quickly became a huge topic in the public debate as a result of the increased use of digital tools during the COVID-19 pandemic, where for example the shift to online work and education involved using several popular digital platforms that required users to agree to data surveillance to take part in their education or employment.

Citizens were also concerned about how their data were collected, stored and used at city level, as data can be **collected ubiquitously in cities**, not just about those who are online and access online platforms, but potentially about

every resident that simply is present in a digitally surveilled area, uses public transport or accesses online services for public goods. Research also shows how certain groups and neighbourhoods, which tend to be the poorest ones, tend to face higher levels of data collection as a result of where they live, the services they use and their higher level of interactions with public services, specifically social and welfare related services¹⁹.

As data are increasingly collected from everyone and everywhere through multiple and simple interactions in our cities where we live, work and socialise, questions of **data justice** come to the fore, which examines the risks of digital tools used in public services. Citizens using these services are in fact made visible, represented and treated differently as a result of their digital activities and records²⁰. This situation might affect citizens living in certain places more than others, based on the spread of digital tools in the urban space and their use within public services. In the current context, where the private sector is largely in control of decisions made over our data, the largest imbalance is between those the data is mined from, and those who are using it and can profit of it.

In order to address these possible disparities, participants considered important to create **benchmarks for transparency and accountability** in the use of digital data, and to be able to compare across countries. Other practical options that were suggested, in order to improve digital sovereignty of citizens, included the creation of a national 'delete data' option or 'button' in order to remove all but the most essential individual data at the request of a citizen.

Under this topic, as individuals might feel quite helpless in trying to be aware of data collection processes, the role for public institutions emerged as central. Many participants said that there was a big responsibility at city level to make sure people consented and understood what data was being shared, and with whom. There was an understanding that some data transparency was beneficial for the community but that there needs to be a sensible way of approaching these conversations. Additionally, it was also mentioned how critical can be to handle **data as a city**, deciding on the public values and practicing according to them.

Participants considered the opportunity that data collection offers when used for **public good** – through making city information such as air quality, mobility and energy data, the property of communities. This could in turn inspire communities to innovate, encouraging citizen science and engagement on local issues, where citizens could stay in control and take responsibility and accountability for their own data.

¹⁹ Eubanks, V. (2018): *Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor*, St. Martin's Publishing Group

²⁰ Taylor, L. (2017): What is Data Justice? The Case for Connecting Digital Rights and Freedoms Globally. In: *Big Data & Society* 4 (2): 1–14

Next Steps and Future Opportunities

The Cities Coalition for Digital Rights describes cities as “*the closest democratic institutions to the people*” (Cities Coalition for Digital Rights, 2021) and certainly it is cities and other local governance institutions that make a large amount of the decisions that affect their residents’ day to day lives. In the digital realm this is growing more with the increased enthusiasm for ‘*smart cities*’, which involves using local data through sensors, biometric data collection, the internet of things –which refers to the network of connected devices and people- and big data collected from citizens’ online profiles and behaviours to make decisions on mobility, pollution, health risks, or new infrastructures amongst other policy areas²¹. Additionally, as more interaction with city infrastructure and governance is available in a digital format, cities are responsible for those processes to be accessible and ethical, protecting their residents digital rights. The Cities Coalition states clearly in their joint declaration, that they are “*committed to (...) providing trustworthy and secure digital services and infrastructures that support our communities*” (Cities Coalition for Digital Rights, 2021). There is an additional positive aspect of the city’s role in protecting their residents’ digital rights, which is to ensure they are using opportunities presented by digitalisation and new technologies to the greatest advantage and improving the lives of their constituents.

Although digitalisation is not fully within municipal governments’ competence, it certainly is part of cities public services responsibility to set the vision for how to introduce digitalisation and to address especially the democratic challenges that rise with it. Digitalisation in fact, increasingly shapes our neighbours’ quality of life, access to rights and even opportunities to participate at city level. One could argue that ***data is in fact becoming a new “urban infrastructure”***²² like water, electricity, public transport and others. As experts have said “*Data is a key resource in the digital economy, and control over the way it is generated, collected, aggregated, and value is extracted and distributed in society is crucial.*”²³

At the end of our final event, we asked participants directly to gather their views on what the future of the programme might be, as well as to outline some key recommendations and actions for decision-makers and policymakers across

²¹ Tran Thi Hoang, G.; Dupont, L.; Camargo, M. (2019): Application of Decision-Making Methods in Smart City Projects: A Systematic Literature Review *Smart Cities* 2: 3: 433-452. <https://doi.org/10.3390/smarcities2030027>.

²² Tavmen, G. (2020): Data/infrastructure in the smart city: Understanding the infrastructural power of Citymapper app through technicity of data. In: *Big Data & Society*, 1–15, DOI: 10.1177/2053951720965618.

²³ Craglia M., Scholten H., Micheli M., Hradec J., Calzada I., Luitjens S., Ponti M., Boter J., (2021): *Digitranscope: The governance of digitally-transformed society*. Publications Office of the European Union, doi:10.2760/503546

Europe to ensure that digital strategies and debates at public level were done in more participatory manners.

We also asked participants to engage with the fundamental question of how to make it easier for all citizens to voice their opinions on digital rights. This question explored what was needed to make sure that more people felt they had the opportunity, the confidence and the right to participate in shaping and advocating for their digital rights. Discussions included hearing of best practices around civic engagement or ideas for how to take positive steps, as well as what role they would want to take in that process.

- Participants made clear the inner value of **centring people' voices** in the debate on digital rights, as people have multiple roles to play in this space, as experts of their own experience, educators and advocates for themselves and their own communities, but also as innovators and makers who can use technology and make technology in more ethical and participatory ways. Including public participation in debates to advance digital rights in practice was considered as highly beneficial to the cities for the EU-level decision makers. In terms of implementing public engagement in practice it would be possible to draw on best practices and the knowledge already available in the field from other areas (e.g. including public consultations, participatory budgeting and deliberative processes among others methods), to make those approaches the norm in the digital sphere as well. A practical example for citizens engagement was that from Estonia, where the discussions on digitalisation are used to build citizen's trust in the outcome.
- There was the view that if digital tools were used effectively and if peoples' voices were involved in the *whole digitalisation cycle* (from designing to developing and deploying the technology, the tools and the strategies for digitalisation), this would potentially help to achieve positive impact on other areas as well. Participants said that the value of engaging people on digital rights would create **increased trust between institutions and residents**, and they felt that this would be positive for wider purposes and it would positively impact other policy areas as well. Practical suggestions included the use of digital tools to solve collectively identified problems, such as creating platforms where people can share their ideas and opinions, asking the population directly and using online voting on issues. This needed to be combined with offline engagement, including more workshops and events to discuss digital rights, and to inform and motivate people to be engaged.

The CVDR project aimed to address the priorities, hopes and fears for Europeans surrounding digital rights and determine how we make the most of digitalisation and new technologies for all people, whilst managing the risks and protecting the digital rights of all. We learned a lot through the discussions with experts and citizens and we also learned that a lot more will be needed in a field that is likely to become central for better and more inclusive democracies.

In the next and final section, we illustrate some possible ideas to take forward for new work to be done in this field.

Cities and Citizens Advocating for Digital Rights

The Citizen Voices for Digital Rights programme of work has enabled us to bring together a range of voices and opinions from across Europe. It drew on a diverse group of experts in the field, bringing a wide scope of issues to the table. But more importantly, it has been able to incorporate and develop the priorities emerging from citizen's lived experience, directly impacted by the digital transition.

As this report outlined, the digital theme and digital citizen rights in particular stirs up a very wide and diverse debate, including the question of access, education and empowerment to ensure the critical skills and understanding of digital tools is present among the population. There were complex and recurring conversations on privacy and transparency, and the role of the corporations versus the public governments in the development of inclusive and ethical digital strategies and solutions. And finally, awareness of disinformation and the risk this might pose to the quality of our democracies were seen as a priority as well

While none of these themes are likely to go away in the next years, it is also evident that the **digital landscape will keep evolving incredibly quickly**. The Citizen Voices for Digital Rights project has managed to identify and develop many of the issues on which both citizens and local governments feel that more work needs to be done. However, digitalisation is set to accelerate and impact even more areas of our economies, care systems and daily lives in the future. Without citizens participation in the development of new digital strategies, we risk – as this report has highlighted - widening societal divides, severely disadvantaging large groups of people, and undermining trust in information and democracy.

For that reason, it is crucial to keep considering the **role of citizens' participation in digital policy making**. This project has shown it is feasible to have an informed and in-depth conversation with citizens, including involving them in formulating possible solutions and debating future scenarios. It has effectively involved experts where they could contribute the most, and managed to take conversations online when needed, maintaining their depth and added value. Citizen Voices for Digital Rights has also further outlined **the role of cities and municipal administrations** in this exchange, in being able to reach diverse groups of citizens and allow them to engage in conversations about the digitalisation process, by centering the debates on tangible questions and examples.

As we introduced in our Executive Summary, there are **four key elements** that emerged as critical to be addressed by each city that wants to develop its digital strategy in open and participatory ways, and that will need further research and citizens engagement:

Digital Literacy, Access and Empowerment:

Acquiring a good level of digital literacy was considered a *pre-condition* for developing the knowledge and being able to recognise where and

when citizens' digital rights are being infringed, and which systems and institutions they can trust and address to demand for justice.

Future actions in this area might include developing training for citizens to develop stronger critical digital skills. Training options might involve 'train the trainers' approaches in the education sector; target to specific groups and communities that are most in need; or they might also involve training civil servant and officials, as they also need to develop better confidence and knowledge on the topic to be able to empower others to do so.

The Role of the Municipalities in Advancing Digital Rights:

Municipalities have a key role to play to ensure that their digitalisation strategies are designed and delivered in collaborative and inclusive ways that advance people's digital rights.

Future actions in this area might include providing information and raising awareness about digital rights in the population. Initiatives like the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights are fundamental to foster more exchanges among cities as inequalities often appear *between* cities, as municipal governments compete in an environment shaped by private corporations and interests where the cities with more advanced knowledge and expertise in the field of digitalisation and data governance are even more likely to find companies willing to collaborate with them.

Transparency, Privacy and Accountability

This is an area where participants felt the cities hold a huge responsibility by imagining innovative and participatory ways to handle data at a city-level.

Future actions might involve the design of innovative data governance models that promote data collection for public good. Open data governance models can ensure digitalisation processes are based on principles of human rights and advance citizens participation, through citizens science initiatives. Tools to provide oversight and monitoring of digital rights, through national or local digital observatories might also ensure better digital standards, including questions of access, transparency, and accountability.

Centring people's voices and the role of the *lived experience*:

Participatory processes should be embedded in the design of cities' digitalisation strategies from the onset - rather than being an afterthought - and properly resourced.

Future actions in this field are likely to be central in the coming years to develop innovative approaches for *participatory digitalisation processes*. Different democratic designs can be introduced to ensure a more active role of citizens in data collection, data governance and oversight, and knowledge creation. Training to cities' officials on methods of civic participation for digital would also be a field where more work will be needed. Digital sovereignty emerged as something that *results from* and *requires* particular modes of deliberation and representation that purposefully include a variety of stakeholders.

Within Democratic Society, this project has inspired much thinking on the future role of participation and citizens voices in questions of digitalisation and their impact on democracy, and new possible ways to engage citizens on complex and often technical topics. We hope our partners in this project, in particular the Cities Coalition for Digital Rights and the cities of Amsterdam, Milan, Bordeaux and Tirana, have found this programme equally valuable and relevant to the times we are living.

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About the authors

Democratic Society work towards more and better democracy, creating opportunities for people to become involved in the decisions that shape their lives and for them to have the skills to do so effectively. We have extensive experience and expertise in stakeholder participation and engagement, which we bring to all of our projects, ranging from our work on engaging citizens in decisions around climate action to exploring how citizens can have a greater voice in shaping digital transformation. Find out more: www.demsoc.org.